El changes will drive up low-wage end of labour market

(continued from page 1) ...Liberals reduced benefits to 65 percent of salaried earnings, cut maximum weekly benefits from $448 to $413 and introduced a qualifying calculation based on hours of work rather than average earnings, causing many to lose eligibility.

Yet, the roots of the current El changes go ever deeper. Workman describes how after wages rose steadily post-World War II, neoliberal restructuring in the 1970s led to a reduction in the labor market’s tolerance for such wage gains. “The main concern was that the Unemployment Insurance Act was providing a safety net for workers too much labour ... driving up the low-end wage market. This was generally inconsistent with the idea of seeing wages as a floor or fall.” The view from the business class, was that wages could no longer be expected to rise. By the 1980s (under the Chrétien Liberals), there was enough momentum to take a run at El. At a point when the number of unemployed workers was rising, we saw for the first time a decrease in the number of El recipients. The number of unemployed recovering El fell from more than 1 million to about one-third,” argues Workman.

Does the job market facing unsupported, unemployed people look like? For some, nothing.

“The number of people frequently using food banks has been on the rise for years. I’m willing to make the assumption that the number of people on social assistance is also going up. If you have no El benefits, (you still) need to make ends meet, says...”

For others, it looks like a revolving door. According to Statistics Canada, the number of temporary workers in Canada hit a record two million last year. The largely low-waged work of this fleeting variety has been tripled since the growth of permanent work since 2008. This trend fits neatly with what Workman identifies as a goal of the El changes, to “flound the low-wage sector once and for all.”

But as protests against the El changes over the past decade show, labor unions have not been entirely deprived of their ability to organize. “It may be a long winter indeed.”

Community Calendar

For details and updated event listings, visit nbmediacoop.org. To list your event, email: community@nbmediacoop.org.

NB Media Co-op Story Meetings. Join us at our monthly story meetings in Fredericton where we discuss politics and the local economy and decide what to cover in every month. To find out the meeting time and venue, email the editor on 18th or 19th or 20th.

Cinema Politica believes in the power of art not only to entertain but to engage, inform, inspire, and provoke social change. Cinema Politica is the largest volunteer-run, community and campus-based documentary-screening network in the world. In Fredericton, films are screened on Fridays during the fall and winter at 7:00 pm at Conserver House, 186 St. John Street. In Sackville, films are screened monthly at Mount Allison University. Check out film schedules and venues, or start your own chapter at cinema.politica.org.

Protestors at the November 5 anti-shale gas rally express their solidarity with the Indigenous land defenders who were arrested in Renton on October 5, Photo by Lianne Thibodeau.

By NAJAT ABDOU-MCFARLAND

Fredericton - The Unity and Solidarity Rally Against Shale Gas at the opening of the Legislature on November 5 brought people from many corners of the province together in peace and friendship. Two weeks before, on October 17, the ROMP had violently halted the blockade of SWN Resources’ seismic exploratory trucks in Renton, east of Moncton, arresting forty people, many of them Indigenous Mi’km'kwaq land defenders.

Hundreds of anti-shale gas activists from Elsipogtog, Tobique, Saint John, Moncton and Sackville were present at the rally as well as representatives from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUP), the Fredericton District Labour Council, the Council of Canadians and other organizations.

Those who attended the rally wanted to make sure that Premier David Alward heard what they had to say as he arrived at the Legislature, Mark D’Arny, a familiar face in the anti-shale gas movement in Fredericton, welcomed the rally-goers and asked them to turn their backs to the Legislature and towards a tradition that models true democracy; the Longhouse.

Longhouses are traditional structures of indigenous visioning where decisions affecting the Wabanaki people and territory are discussed. For 11 days, from October 26 to November 5, the Longhouse that was erected near the legislature along the banks of the Wostego River (also known as the Saint John River) sheltered a sacred fire that burned day and night under the watchful eye of Firekeepers.

Following the rally, participants took to the streets of downtown Fredericton, chanting slogans such as “No Shale Gas on Stolen Native Land!”. Many people held feathers - symbols of peaceful protest - as they marched.

The march ended at the Wostego Longhouse, where Indigenous leaders spoke out against shale gas and shared their concerns for Mother Earth. Among the speakers was grandmother Willi Nolan, against whom along with others, SWN Resources has filed a lawsuit in relation to the Renton blockade. Nolan demonstrated her resolve and vision for the future: “SWN’s your measures to instill fear in the Warniks, Sinikunik (Elsipogtog) women and children, and people.”

Nolan outlined a vision for sustenance of the people of Sinikunik, where the people are at the center of their reality, with the traditional territory, harvesting trees and fishing in the rivers, lakes and streams. “The forests and the water will be cared for by the community to regenerate and produce true riches for the people who live here; clean air and water, respectfully harvested trees, careful fishing and no more poisons and senseless waste of what Creator gave us so that we can have good lives and care for the earth with love and respect for generations to come.”

St. Mary’s Chief, Candice Paul, expressed dismay at the Premier for not agreeing to meet with her and the Maliseet Grand Council, asserting that governments cannot proceed with natural resource extraction in territory without getting the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples.

Naqit Abood-McFarland is an environmental activist living in Fredericton.

In Brief

The New Brunswick provincial court denied Elsipogtog First Nation’s injunction against SWN’s shale gas exploration in its territory on November 18, after hearing the ruling, Elsipogtog Chief Arren Sock reported that he does not intend to give up the struggle to find a way to support his people against SWN’s activities.

On November 10, Mike Connors, a lawyer for SWN Resources, visited one of the highway sites near SWN’s exploration area and offered a deal: SWN will drop charges against the people named in SWN’s lawsuit against the protest if SWN is allowed to carry out seismic testing for the next 14 days. Everyone at the protest camp refused.

The Bear Nicholas, a Wabanaki defender of native languages from Tobique, opined in November that, “The language we use has hands on the reality left unless something different is done very soon. Indeed, only three of 60 languages indigenous to Canada are free for survival to two of the major languages unless something very different is done soon. The reality is that this is already very Aboriginal in its survival, schools conducted only in English or French, even those with Aboriginal language programs, the destruction of our languages will continue just as effectively, and maybe even more so, than it did in residential schools. And it will not be either a natural decline or a natural death.”

Seattle elected a socialist to city council in November. Santana Ramberg, a 43-year-old college economics professor, is the first socialist to be elected in Seattle in over 100 years. Sawant was a key figure in the Occupy Seattle movement. Sawant was elected on a platform that supports an increase in the minimum wage to $15, the “public option” to help fund a public transit system and other services. In Chile, Camila Vallejo, a 27-year-old community worker won a seat in Congress, also in November. Vallejo was a figure in the student uprising in 2011 that demanded free and improved education.

Lone Pine, a Canadian gas company, filed a $250 million lawsuit against the Government of Canada related to Quebec’s fracking ban in the St. Lawrence River in 2012. The company says they are based exclusively in Canada, the company is chartered in Delaware and so is able to take advantage of provisions in Canada’s North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that allows companies to sue foreign governments for allegedly violating certain provisions of the trade deal, specifically NAFTA’s investor protections and provisions against indirect expropriations.